

# Tawhid: The Oneness of God and the Desire for the Good

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In the epilogue of his book *Battling to the End*, René Girard articulates his growing anxiety concerning the West and Islam since September 11, 2001. He states that "We are witnessing a new stage in the escalation to extremes."<sup>1</sup> As an escalation of mimetic rivalry, both Islam and the West are responsible for their participation in the current global crisis of violence. Indeed, Girard claims in the same book, "When violence is involved, wrongs are always shared."<sup>2</sup> But it might seem as though violence is endemic to Islam in a way that it is not to the West. Girard invokes Islamic history, claiming that the 9/11 attacks are "a clear sign of the return to the archaic, a return to seventh, eighth and ninth centuries."<sup>3</sup> This reference to the first centuries of Islam situates violence at the very heart of the religion, and at the heart of the Prophet Muhammad's mission. Islam, Girard seems to assume, is a religion built on conquest, indeed, built on archaic sacred violence. "Personally," he claims, "I have the impression that this religion has used the Bible as a support to rebuild an archaic religion that is more powerful than all the others. It threatens to become . . . the new face of the escalations to extremes. . . . It would be an archaic religion strengthened by aspects of the Bible and Christianity."<sup>4</sup>

Girard's growing concern since 9/11 that Islam could be a regression to archaic religions, which are necessarily connected to sacrificial violence,



is shared by many. Of course, that horrific day wasn't the first time people used religion to justify horrendous acts of terror, but it made the question of violence and Islam one of the most pressing issues of our time. The religious motivation behind 9/11 was undeniably demonstrated by a letter full of violent religious language found in the luggage of one of the hijackers. The document evokes a liturgy, as if that violent attack was an act of worship:

Purify your soul from all unclean things.

Tame your soul. Convince it. Make it understand. Completely forget something called "this world."

Pray the supplication as you leave your hotel. Pray the supplication when riding in the taxi, when entering the airport. Before you step aboard the plane, pray the supplication. At the moment of death, pray.

Bless your body with verses of scripture. Rub the verses on your luggage, your clothes, your passport. Polish your knife with the verses, and be sure the blade is sharp; you must not discomfort your sacrifice.

Remember, they may be stronger than you, but their equipment, their security, their technology—nothing will keep you from your task. How many small groups have defeated big groups by the will of God?

Remember, this is a battle for the sake of God. The enemy are the allies of Satan, the brothers of the Devil. Do not fear them, for the believer fears only God.

And when the hour approaches, welcome death for the sake of God.

With your last breath remember God. Make your final words "There is no god but God."<sup>5</sup>

This letter is cause for great concern, as it seems to bolster Girard's contention that Islam engenders a return to the archaic sacred. This analysis admits that violence is easily found in the Qur'an and in Islamic history. Indeed, all of human history and all sacred texts contain justifications for sacred violence against an other. The question that mimetic theory poses is whether or not Islam contains within it the necessary elements to critique that violence.<sup>6</sup> Using Islamic theology, Islamic anthropology, and the tools of mimetic theory, I will argue that, instead of inducting its followers into a return to archaic violence, Islam is itself a critique of archaic religion.

According to Girard, mimetic violence has infected human beings from

the foundation of human culture. The first culture was born out of scapegoating violence, and out of that violence, archaic religion was also birthed. Before the murder, the victimizers demonized their scapegoat by transferring "the disorder and the offenses producing it to the victim." After the sacrifice, when peace was temporarily restored, the victimizers transferred "their newly found peace to the victim."<sup>7</sup> Girard calls this process "double transference." A god and a mythology were soon birthed, but it was a god and a mythology of paradoxical effect. The mythological gods are simultaneously violent and peaceful. In this system, peace is only temporary. Whenever violence and conflict again threatens the community's survival, a new scapegoat is blamed and then sacrificed, once again bringing temporary peace and unity. The demand for the sacrifice is projected upon the gods. The intoxicating sense of unity and peace that comes from uniting over and against the sacrificial victim blinds the community to its own violence. As Girard claims, "The celebrants do not and must not comprehend the true role of the sacrificial act. The theological basis of the sacrifice has a crucial role in fostering this misunderstanding. It is the god who supposedly demands the victims."<sup>8</sup> This misunderstanding means that it is impossible to critique our own violence, for the gods demand it. Within the sacrificial system of the archaic, we are by definition blind to our own violence.

### The Islamic Critique of Archaic Theology: Tawhid

In its historical context, pre-Islamic Arabia is known to Muslims as the *Jahaliyah*, or the "Age of Ignorance." Muslims claim that pre-Islamic Arabians were ignorant about God because they had not received a revelation from God.<sup>9</sup> It is often assumed today that this was a polytheistic culture, but that is not quite right. Arabian archaic religions evolved into henotheism, the belief in a high, transcendent God with lesser divinities between that God and the world.<sup>10</sup> Pre-Islamic Arabians called the high God *al-Lah*, or the God. This high God was entirely transcendent and had very little concern for the world. People would pray to the lesser divinities, hoping that those divinities might act as intermediaries between them and *al-Lah*. Unfortunately, *al-Lah* remained largely uncaring. Farid Esack claims that in the religious worldview of pre-Islamic Arabia, one's political, economic, and social position in life



was determined by the mystery of Time. "Time had pre-arranged the four fundamentals of existence: food, the sex of children, happiness or misery, and one's life span."<sup>11</sup>

The pre-Islamic Arabian understanding that God is transcendent and not at all concerned about the world or human affairs contributed to a lack of concern for the victims of culture. There was little desire to care for victims of poverty or hunger because the connection between cultural practices, assumptions, roles, and institutions that led to the creation of victims remained unknown. Time was in control; thus, there were no victims, no scapegoats.

Islam's fundamental theological concept, known as *tawhid*, critiques both archaic religions' ambivalent gods and its evolution into the indifferent high God of pre-Islamic henotheism. *Tawhid* refers to the oneness of God. Islamic scholar Michael Sells claims that *tawhid* refers to the "interior unity of the deity, that in God all the attributes—such as seeing, hearing, knowing, and *willing*—are in some sense one."<sup>12</sup> *Tawhid* thus critiques the ambivalent nature of the archaic gods. For God to have paradoxical effects or conflicting wills would break God's *tawhid*. This means there can be no paradox of violence and peace within God's *tawhid*. In addition, the Muslim theologian Tariq Ramadan claims that "the concept of *tawhid* expresses first and essentially the fact of the absolute oneness of God: the first Principle, Creator of all, eternally present in history and at each moment."<sup>13</sup> Far from being the aloof and uncaring God of pre-Islamic henotheism, the Islamic doctrine of *tawhid* means that God has always been radically present in the world and cares deeply about human affairs.

The essence of God's oneness, according to the Islamic doctrine of *tawhid*, is not associated with violence or conquest. Rather, the essence of God's oneness is Grace and Mercy.<sup>14</sup> This is revealed in the formulaic prayer that introduces 113 of 114 suras of the Qur'an.<sup>15</sup> Muslims refer to this prayer as the "*basmalah*." The *basmalah* has been translated in various ways, but the formula is essentially, "In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful."<sup>16</sup> In his commentary on the Qur'an, Abdullah Yusuf Ali explains the implications of God's Grace and Mercy, stating that God's

Mercy may imply pity, long suffering, patience, and forgiveness, all of which the sinner needs and God Most Merciful bestows in abundant

measure. But there is a Mercy that goes before even the need arises, the Grace which is ever watchful, and flows from God Most Gracious to all His creatures, protecting them, preserving them, guiding them, and leading them to clearer light and higher life.<sup>17</sup>

The *basmalah* is essential to understanding God's *tawhid* of Grace and Mercy, and thus is essential for interpreting the Qur'an. By placing the *basmalah* at the beginning of these chapters, the Qur'an provides its own interpretive lens of Grace and Mercy. As Ali suggests above, God's Grace and Mercy are pure gift. The *basmalah* reveals God's desire to offer Grace and Mercy before we even need it, indeed, before we even ask for it. Reza Shah-Kazemi supports Ali's statement when he writes, "The Koran describes the divine Mercy in a manner that is as inspiring as it is overwhelming: God's love is infinite and thus His Mercy is given to us 'beyond all reckoning,' beyond anything 'deserved by us.'"<sup>18</sup>

The great sin within Islam is to forget the essential Oneness of God, and thus associate something to God other than God's Grace and Mercy.<sup>19</sup> Forgetting the Oneness of God is sinful, but not because it harms God. The Qur'an is a reminder of God's *tawhid* and states to Muhammad about those who have forgotten or don't believe in the reminder, "[Prophet], do not be grieved by those who disbelieve. They will not harm God in the least" (3:176). Humans only harm themselves, as God gives us the freedom to cultivate sinful practices, as sura 3:178 states: "The disbelievers should not think that it is better for them that We give them more time: when We give them more time they become more sinful." But sinning is not something that just "disbelievers" do. The Qur'an even states that the Prophet Muhammad should ask for forgiveness. "So be patient, Prophet, for what God has promised is sure to come. Ask forgiveness for your sins" (40:55). Humans are solely responsible for sin and oppression, while God is, as the Qur'an claims, "self-sufficient and full of mercy" (6:133).

### **Qur'anic Anthropology: The Desire for the Good**

As Islamic theology must begin and end with the *tawhid* of God, Islamic anthropology must begin and end with the *tawhid* of being human. Islam



asserts that God's desire for humans is consistent with God's Grace and Mercy. The Arabic word *islam* partly means "submission." The goal of a Muslim is to submit to God's Grace and Mercy and participate in that Grace and Mercy.<sup>20</sup> *Islam* also has strong connotations of "peace" and "self-giving."<sup>21</sup> One's submission to God is not an act of capitulation to a tyrannical divinity. Rather, submission to God is an act of receiving one's identity from God's self-giving Grace, Mercy, and Peace. The goal is peace, as Mohammad Abu-Nimer claims: "Peace, not war or violence, is God's true purpose for humanity."<sup>22</sup>

According to the Qur'an, God created all humans "in the finest state" (95:4). The Qur'an also reveals that humans were created from "one soul" (7:189) and that God "gave everything its form" (20:50). These verses reveal the oneness, or tawhid, of being human, which is, according to Shah-Kazemi, "a reflection of the oneness of God."<sup>23</sup> When we submit to God and openly receive our identity from God, we freely receive the finest state that God mercifully bestows upon all humans. Receiving our being from God frees us from having to fight with one another to obtain that "finest state" of being. It frees us from what mimetic theory refers to as a mimetic rivalry.

Although humans are created in the finest state, there is diversity among humans. The Qur'an claims that God intended that diversity and that diversity is not a justification to make accusations of difference. "O Mankind!" says the Qur'an. "We created you from a single (pair) of male and female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other) (49:13).

But the Qur'an is very clear that we don't have to submit to God. We don't have to acknowledge the tawhid of being human. We can choose to submit to other models. Ultimately, claims the Qur'an, we have two choices: God or Satan. We will submit to one or the other. The Qur'an states, "You who believe, enter wholeheartedly into submission to God and do not follow in Satan's footsteps, for he is your sworn enemy" (2:208). In sura 4:119, Satan tells God what he will do to humans: "I will mislead them and incite vain desires in them; I will command them to slit the ears of cattle; I will command them to tamper with God's creation." The verse goes on to say, "Whoever chooses Satan as a patron instead of God is utterly ruined." According to the Qur'an, no matter how much we justify violence and war, these are false human realities rooted in a satanic desire to cause enmity, hatred, and destruction. Satan's spell is so strong that if left to our own desires, we will

be seduced by Satan. The Qur'an warns against Satan's spell, but also points to the solution. In sura 7:26–27 God tells the "Children of Adam, We have given you garments to cover your nakedness and as adornment for you; the garment of God-consciousness is the best of all garments—this is one of God's signs so that people may take heed. Children of Adam, do not let Satan seduce you." God's consciousness is the tawhid of Grace and Mercy. It's a consciousness that God has given to all humanity, all of Adam's children.

Whereas God graciously bestows the "finest form" upon humans, Satan mimetically incites vain desires in all humans. Following in the footsteps of Satan, we easily forget the tawhid of being human. When we forget this, we fall into rivalry with one another. The rivalry is thrilling, but ultimately leaves us searching for more. The Qur'an acknowledges this mimetic principle, saying, "Bear in mind that the present life is just a game, a diversion, an attraction, a cause of boasting among you, of rivalry in wealth and children. It is like plants that spring up after the rain: their growth at first delights the sower, but then you see them wither away, turn yellow, and become stubble. There is terrible punishment in the next life as well as forgiveness and approval from God; the life of this world is only an illusory pleasure. So race for your Lord's forgiveness" (57:20–21).

The Qur'an insists upon the threat of hell. It describes hell in very mimetic terms. Hell is a place where humans no longer participate in the goodness of God's Mercy. More specifically, hell is a place where we forget the tawhid of being human and we fall into a cycle of accusation and blame. The Qur'an claims that to the inhabitants of hell "[It will be said], 'Here is another crowd of people rushing headlong to join you.' [The response will be], 'They are not welcome! They will burn in the Fire.' They will say to them, 'You are not welcome! It was you who brought this on us, an evil place to stay' . . . This is how they will be. The inhabitants of the Fire will blame one another in this way" (38:55–64).

Islam seeks to reorient our desires away from the hell of accusations and toward the Grace and Mercy of God by acknowledging the tawhid of being human. Once we acknowledge that anthropological truth, all scapegoating categories are no longer valid and we desire the good for all humans. There is an ethical component to desiring the good. As Reza Shah-Kazemi states, "The human participation in the divine quality of compassion is made crystal clear in the Koran."<sup>24</sup> The essence of that participation is found in 2:177:



Goodness does not consist in turning your face towards East or West. The truly good are those who believe in God and the Last Day, in the angels, the Scripture, and the prophets; who give away some of their wealth, however much they cherish it, to their relatives, to orphans, the needy, travelers and beggars, and to liberate those in bondage; those who keep up the prayer and pay the prescribed alms; who keep pledges whenever they make them; who are steadfast in misfortune, adversity, and times of danger. These are the ones who are true, and it is they who are aware of God.

Participating in the Mercy and Compassion of God means that we desire the good for the other, especially the other who is a scapegoat of culture. As stated previously, the henotheism of pre-Islamic Arabia allowed the rich to neglect the cultural practices, assumptions, and institutions that fostered the scapegoats of their society, specifically orphans, the poor, and widows. Islam's message challenged those practices, assumptions, and institutions. As Mohammad Abu-Nimer claims in his book *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, "A major call of Islamic religion is to establish a just social reality. . . . It is a Muslim's duty to work for justice and reject oppression on both interpersonal and structural levels."<sup>25</sup> This message of social justice put Muhammad in conflict with his own tribe, the Quraysh. The Quraysh tribe was the political, religious, and economic powerhouse of Arabia, and the powerful members of the Quraysh had little concern for the poor and vulnerable members of society. Reza Aslan points out that "The Shaykhs of Quraysh had become far more interested in maintaining the apparatus of trade than in caring for the dispossessed."<sup>26</sup> Muhammad challenged his tribe's victimization of the marginalized, but the Quraysh would not listen. Sura 7:28 states "Yet, when [these people] do something disgraceful they say, 'We found our fathers doing this,' and 'God has commanded us to do this.' Say [Prophet], 'God does not command disgraceful deeds.'" The Qur'an called for a radical transformation in the cultural understanding of God: This is a God who stands with the victims of culture. It was a message that would necessarily put Muhammad into conflict with the powerful elite of Mecca, indeed, with his own tribe.

The Quraysh sought to violently thwart Muhammad's message; while living in Mecca, Muhammad responded with nonviolence. Many Muslims emphasize this period of Muhammad's life and see in him a model of

nonviolence. For example, internationally known Islamic scholar Maulana Wahiduddin Khan has produced over one hundred books that have been translated into numerous languages. His audience "includes Muslim professionals and secular educators and intellectuals, as well as graduates of the *madrasah* (Islamic seminary) system and other religiously minded Muslims."<sup>27</sup> He claims that "of the twenty-three-year period of prophethood, the initial thirteen years were spent by the Prophet in Mecca. The Prophet fully adopted the way of pacifism or non-violence during this time. There were many such issues in Mecca at the time which could have been the subject of clash and confrontation. But, by avoiding all such issues, the Prophet of Islam strictly limited his sphere to peaceful propagation of the word of God."<sup>28</sup> Wahiduddin Khan also looks to the Qur'an to argue for an Islamic theology of nonviolence. "According to the Qur'an, God 'abhors violence' (*Surat al-Baqarah*, 2:205) and encourages one to be patient, which in turn dissipates violence."<sup>29</sup> He also claims:

[In the Qur'an], . . . patience is set above all other Islamic virtues with the exceptional promise of reward beyond measure (39:10). . . . Patience implies a peaceful response, whereas impatience implies a violent response. The word *sabr* [patience] exactly expresses the notion of non-violence as it is understood in modern times. That patient action is non-violent action has been clearly expressed in the Qur'an.<sup>30</sup>

During the mid-twentieth century, the renowned Muslim pacifist Abdul Ghaffar Khan referred to Muhammad's nonviolent action while in Mecca to persuade one hundred thousand of his fellow Pathans to join him in nonviolent resistance to the British Raj. He claimed that "There is nothing surprising in a Muslim or a Pathan like me subscribing to the creed of nonviolence. It is not a new creed. It was followed fourteen hundred years ago by the Prophet all the time he was in Mecca, and it has since been followed by all those who wanted to throw off an oppressor's yoke."<sup>31</sup> Muhammad Abu-Nimer lists seven Islamic scholars who each look to "the new global realities, including advanced weaponry systems and increasingly destructive forms of warfare" and claim that they "oblige Muslims—indeed, all people—to abandon violence since there can no longer be assured limits to its extent."<sup>32</sup> Syrian Islamic scholar Jawdat Saïd critiques violence by noting "a famous Hadith that has



been widely quoted in Islamic literature and is often hung as a calligraphic adornment in Muslim homes: 'Whenever violence enters into something, it disgraces it, and whenever "gentle-civility" enters into something it graces it. Truly, God bestows on account of gentle conduct what he does not bestow on account of violent conduct.'<sup>33</sup>

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Girard is correct that we need to try to understand the relationship between Islam and violence "without any presuppositions and [by] using all the resources available from the study of Islam." Indeed, "The work to be done is immense."<sup>34</sup> That immensity of work requires us to explore violence in the Qur'an, Muhammad's violence in Medina, as well as the violence found in Islamic history, theology, philosophy, and law. I wonder, though, just how honest our exploration can be if we take Girard's concern as our starting place. Does this blind us to new discoveries? Does it condemn us to find exactly what we predicted we would find?

Most importantly, if mimetic theory is to make any inroads into Islamic studies, it is imperative that Islamic scholars take the lead in that endeavor. As I demonstrated, Muslim scholars are engaged in a vigorous critique of the religious justifications for violence. Any sweeping accusation against Islam from within mimetic theory will alienate those potentially sympathetic Islamic scholars from collaborating with us. The best way to move forward in the study of Islam, violence, and mimetic theory is in the spirit of openness and the humility that starts with a willingness to learn from and be influenced by one another.

### NOTES

1. René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoit Chantre*, trans. Mary Baker (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 212.
2. *Ibid.*, 16.
3. *Ibid.*, 212.
4. *Ibid.*, 214.
5. Reza Aslan, *How to Win a Cosmic War* (New York: Random House, 2009), 3–4.

6. Mimetic theory claims that the Bible contains sacred violence, but also critiques that violence. Mimetic theory calls the Bible a "text in travail" as it struggles against its sacred violence. See Gil Ballie, *Violence Unveiled* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 133–52.
7. René Girard, *Girard Reader*, ed. James Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 293.
8. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 7.
9. See Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 55–71.
10. Henotheism is a term coined by Friedrich Max Müller and can be found in a book called *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by the Religions of India* (London: Longmans, Green, 1878), 290. For its relationship to pre-Islamic Arabia, see Reza Aslan's *No God but God* (New York: Random House, 2005), 8, 40.
11. Farid Esack, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2005), 34.
12. Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Printing, 1999), 19. Italics added.
13. Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12.
14. When associating God with Grace and Mercy, the Qur'an capitalizes Grace and Mercy. I will follow the Qur'an's lead throughout this essay.
15. Sura 9 does not begin with the *basmalah*. For a brief discussion of the multiple theories about the missing *basmalah*, see Esack, *The Qur'an*, 60–61. Many scholars believe that sura 9 is the continuation of sura 8, which explains the missing *basmalah*.
16. This is how Abdullah Yusuf Ali translates the *basmalah* in his book *The Qur'an: Text, Translation, and Commentary*, 4th ed. (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 2002).
17. *Ibid.*, 14n19.
18. Reza Shah-Kazemi, *My Mercy Encompasses All: The Koran's Teachings on Compassion, Peace, & Love* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007), 8.
19. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 6–7.
20. See Shah-Kazemi, *My Mercy Encompasses All*, 6.
21. Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.
22. Mohammed Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 27.
23. Shah-Kazemi, *My Mercy Encompasses All*, 4.
24. *Ibid.*, 7.
25. Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 49.
26. Aslan, *No God but God*, 31.
27. See Irfan A. Omar, "Towards an Islamic Theology of Nonviolence," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 72, no. 9 (2008): 671–72.
28. Quoted in Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 42.



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29. Omar, "Towards an Islamic Theology of Nonviolence," 677.
30. Ibid.
31. Eknath Easwaran, *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Tomaes, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1999), 103.
32. Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 39–40. He refers to Chaiwat Satha-Anand, "Core Values for Peacemaking in Islam: The Prophets Practice as Paradigm," in *Building Peace in the Middle East*, ed. Elise Boulding (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reiner, 1993); Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, "Nonviolence and Islam" Address to the Forum on Islam and Peace in the Twenty-First Century, American University, Washington, D.C., 1998; Jawdat Saïd, "Peace—or Nonviolence—in History and with the Prophets," paper presented at the Forum on Islam and Peace in the Twenty-First Century, American University, Washington, D.C., 1997; John Kelsay, *Islam and War: A Study in Comparative Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993); Eknath Easwaran, *A Man to Match His Mountains: Badshah Khan, Nonviolent Soldier of Islam* (Petaluma, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1984); Glenn Paige, Chaiwat Satha-Anand, and Sarah Gilliart, eds., *Islam and Nonviolence* (Honolulu: Center for Global Nonviolence Planning Project, Matsunaga Institute for Peace, University of Hawaii, 1993).
33. Quoted in Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 42.
34. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 214.